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A Swing State Disected

By Patrick Anderson

Michigan has a history of economic swings and a ticket-splitter reputation. We currently have a Democratic governor and a Republican Supreme Court, House, Senate, and Congressional majority. Obviously people in Michigan are not going straight down the line; they do split their ticket and Michigan has supported third party candidates in both general elections and primaries.

When he was running the Bull Moose Party, Teddy Roosevelt won Michigan, not the Republican, not the Democrat, Teddy won. George Wallace won the Democratic primary in 1968. Ross Perot did very well. Pat Buchanan and John McCain won Republican primaries here. While the rest of the country was ready to say George Bush is our person in 2000, Michigan voters weren't there. So it's an ornery, kind of contrary, we'll-do-it-our-own-way state. We'll forge ahead, nonetheless, and see how the pocketbook predicts Michigan.

Michigan just can't be explained very well by pocketbook issues. Nationally we'll come up with a prediction for 2004 and have some confidence in it. But with Michigan you can only explain about half the variation in the votes. Unemployment matters more here than it does nationally. We're more sensitive to unemployment than we are to gains in income. Third party candidates have a huge effect here, much more than in the nation as a whole.

It's also interesting that war affects Michigan voters differently, and I thought about this quite a bit. You get into a limited war, and Michigan voters are really cautious about that. I don't have a full explanation but I'm thinking of the history we've had here. We saw a lot of patriotic efforts in the Civil War, the Red Arrow Highway was built out here commemorating World War I. But limited war is something that Michigan voters are much more cautious about. If we try to look at Michigan, pocketbook issues favor Bush: income is growing, unemployment is still higher but it is dropping. But the Iraq war is going to weigh down the Bush folk more heavily here in Michigan than in other states. Michigan voters are historically cautious and, therefore, we'll show you how Michigan does versus the nation as a whole. Sometimes, as with the Reagan landslides, we're dead on. But other times we're just off. There is a pattern here, there's a relationship, but we are not hand in glove with the nation as a whole.

This year there is no third party challenger to Bush. Nader, I think, will be attractive to some voters if he is on the ballot here in Michigan, and economic issues only explain about half the Michigan vote. Therefore I'll boldly say that I don't have a confident prediction for Michigan.... Higher income and employment indicate a Bush re-election, nationally, in 2004, but Michigan voters are far too ornery and unpredictable, so Michigan is up for grabs.